

Re-imagining the Melting pot and the Golden door – A Cachet Portrayal of Cultural Identity and Multiculturalism in 'The Scent of Pepper'

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Abstract

Kavery Nambisan is a renowned Indian writer and she has written six novels so far, namely: 'The Truth about Bharath (Almost)' (1992), 'The Scent of Pepper' (1996), 'Mango Coloured Fish' (1998), 'On the Wings of Butterflies' (2002), 'The Hills of Angheri' (2005) and 'The Story That Must Not Be Told' (2010). She is a physician by profession and she serves the poor and needy. She says that she has been influenced greatly by Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. This study aims at an analysis of Kavery Nambisan's novel, 'The Scent of Pepper' so as to bring out her treatment of the cultural identity and multiculturalism seen in Kodagu through her perceptions. Kavery Nambisan's 1996 novel 'The Scent of Pepper' is a detailed fictional journey into the world of Kodavas. It gives a great picture of the Kodavas who are a fierce, proud, martial race and owners of vast coffee estates. For the first time, the small ethnic minority, the Coorgis, enter Indian English fiction in her second novel, 'The Scent of Pepper'. The characters in the novel are very real as the author has picked up real life stories from Coorg which she heard from her grandmother and used them in the plot of her novel. The distinctive culture and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by the novelist by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who enters the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride.

Keywords:- Culture, Identity, Multiculturalism, Tradition, Religion

The present paper focuses on the restoration of the Indian sensibility destroyed by colonialism and the post-modern features of the fourth period which can be felt in the major part of her fiction. The feminists of this period have a vision that woman must be more merciless to herself than history, which would help to create an image of the transformed self, fully aware and self-possessed. Nambisan, prompted by her female and feminine self, has written four major novels with woman as the protagonist. Though all types of feminism are present in her novels, Nambisan, the living writer of the post modern world is more of a post-feminist than a feminist. 'The Scent of Pepper' is a sprawling saga set in the lush hills of Coorg, the place famous for coffee plantations and hilly areas inhabited by robust people who identify themselves as nature's people. Though they depend on nature for their sustenance and are deeply aware of nature's bounty invoked through the blessings of deities and ancestors; they too are influenced and carried away by the sweeping winds of capitalism, British imperialism, adopting the foreign culture and customs at the cost of severing from the customs and rituals of the community.

Nambisan is gifted with a keen sense of perception and an eye for detail that does not miss the shape and contour of the coffee leaves or the slope of the mountain or the various domestic tasks that make the novel an interesting read. She bravely attempts to project her characters made of eccentric personalities, quirky tastes, lofty ambitions and aspirations to create a niche for themselves but indicates a victory for the characters who remain true and faithful to nature and their roots. The novel in detail explores the peculiar cultural identity of the Kodavas, a small ethnic group located in the misty hills of Kodagu. The multicultural aspects are traced through their lifestyle, attire, food style and many more. The Kodava, being different from any other community, has adopted certain factors from their invaders who were the British and henceforth it is said that Kodava's are the followers of Westernization. Nambisan's fiction is not a dry spring but it has variety in it.

The distinctive culture and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by the novelist by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who enters the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. Baliyanna, an England-educated veterinary doctor and a wealthy land owner belongs to Kaleyanda family. Nambisan pens the novels with interesting anecdotes about the Kodagu tribes, their customs

and cultural practices, the mixing of the western and the local culture and their effects on the people of Coorg. The characters are both modern and traditional. She writes with amusement at the blind adoration for the British culture by the Kodavas and the extent of anglicizing their life in terms of names, lifestyle, food habits, customs, dressing and even the cultivation of the gardens. Despite the fact that Kodava's inheriting their own tradition, it is the only group which holds the right to carry the 'Gun' without license in all over India. "In semi – darkness she saw her husband – big and eager in white kupyra and red chale with the silver – sheathed peeche kaththi dangling from his waist (03)"The peeche kaththi is the traditional symbol of the Kodavas which is seen in the ceremonies and in their houses.

Set in Southern India, 'The Scent of Pepper' tells the story of the Kaleyandas, a family born of warriors and the owners of vast estates; they are the envy of the local feudal gentry. Kavery Nambisan's elegiac novel peels away the layers of mystery surrounding a fierce and independent people. Nambisan highlights the plot by amalgamating the rich kodava tradition with the varied cultures incorporated in making Kodava community well known all over India. The kodavathis are showcased very platonically in the entire novel by Nambisan through the main protagonist Nanji. "As the red blush in the west merged with the violet darkness, the lamps inside the house were lit. The festive sounds of kombu, kottu and dudi filled the house. Bride (Nanji) dropped a pinch of saffron rice into the copper pitcher at the doorway and bent down to touch his (Rao Bahadur) feet" (3).

The distinctive cultural and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who has entered the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. "After two days of forced hospitality, her (Nanji's) stepmother subjected her to a meager diet and coffee without milk, though it was an established Kodava custom to overfeed the pregnant women. That wasn't mindless pampering but wise tradition" (11). The novelist lists out the edible items offered in the Kodava household to the pregnant women. Nanji shows how tough a Kodavathi (a woman of Coorg) is born and brought up. Nanji is married to Baliyanna an England-educated veterinary doctor and a wealthy land owner belongs to Kaleyanda family. He marries the child widow Nanji at the age of thirteen and becomes a widow at fourteen. The thin-faced girl of seventeen year old in a white sari has captured Baliyanna's interest and his heart. In kodagu too, child marriage and widow re- marriage were seen as in any other part of India.

The most intriguing part of Kodava marriage is that "Mangalsuthra" is put by the mother of the bridegroom and not the bride. It is said to be the ancient belief which is followed even in the present scenario despite modernization and transition in women. The distinctive cultural and religious practices of the people of Coorg are faithfully presented by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who has entered the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. "After two days of forced hospitality, her (Nanji's) stepmother subjected her to a meager diet and coffee without milk, though it was an established Kodava custom to overfeed pregnant women. That wasn't mindless pampering but wise tradition" (11). The novelist lists out the edible items offered in the Kodava household to the pregnant women. "Tradition demanded that pregnant Kodava women eat eggs laid by red hens, two ladles of ghee a day and rotis with honey, in addition to a lehyam made of jaggery, sesame seeds, cashew nuts, almonds and sunflower seeds in the morning"(11).

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On Rao Bahadur's eleventh-day death ceremony, Nanji Chambavva walked to the backyard with the food covered in banana leaves, laid it near the well and clapped her hand, called Ka..Ka...Ka On the same day hundreds of people were fed. "The family followed the age-old Kodava custom of pilgrimage to Talakaveri at the top of the Brahmagiri hill. There they scattered Rao Bahadur's ashes in the river" (16). These are the rituals practiced by the Kodavas after the death of a person in their families. Kodava's marriage is a grand ceremony. During Boju's marriage Baliyanna arranges five hundred bottles of soda and fifty bottles of whisky and he considers it as an unavoidable expense. At the 'muhurtam', it was a custom that the bridegroom should bend to touch the feet of his elders who have come to bless him. In dressing, Kodavas follow Kudiya tradition, with a few modifications. "The free flowing end of the sari was brought beneath the left arm across the back and knotted over the right shoulder. The straight, non-nonsense fall of the sari over the front accentuated curves and enhanced the beauty" (26). It shows their dressing pattern and the wearing of sari in this manner increase the beauty of their women.

Nambisan's novel 'The Scent of Pepper' is a haunting tale of a family belonging to the Kaleyanda clan inhabiting much of the novel and the characters. It is a moving saga of the life and times of Nanji, the central character around whom the novel centers about, though Nambisan does not envisage this development in the novel. The novelist brings out the various festivals marking the different seasons and Kodavas functions associated with agriculture. For instance festivals such as the Kalipodh, Puthari and the Shankramana are celebrated to rejoice the nature's bounty and power to rejuvenate the body and soul of the people of the region. Puthari is celebrated at the time of harvest. During the Puthari, the auspicious night of full moon when the crop is ready to harvest, they go to the fields to cut the first ripe sheaves of paddy and tie them to the doors and bedposts. It is a ritual which shows that they offer the best of food and toddy to the gods and ancestors. They use Rose and Tulsi leaves to prepare garland which is the favorite one for their god. The month of Tula in Kodagu is the time of rejoice. They celebrate Sankramana during this time that is the end of the monsoon. The Kodavas go to Talakaveri at the top of the Brahmagiri hill to bathe in the sacred waters. "Coconuts dressed in red, jeweled and garlanded, are floated upon the river. It is the time of promise" (69). They use traditional food varieties such as puttu, nooputtu, pork, mutton palay, payasam, mango chutney, jeerige-sanna rice, thambattoo (a sticky-sweet item) and so on. All these reveal their different varieties of food. The Kodavas absorbed many aspects from the foreigners, except their religion. They have gods namely, Lord Igguthappa and Bhadrakali. The Hindu gods have come secretly to Kodagu. Before that they have worshipped their ancestors who constantly hover over Kodagu and guard them. Most Kodavas have aped the British. They have borrowed the names, food habits, attires and etiquette from the British. They have no time to worry about the freedom struggle movement in India. They are the only race in India which has been permitted to have guns without license. Kavery Nambisan is extremely brilliant in her style and language.

Nambisan pens the novel with interesting aspects. As she talks about Nanji she highlights Kodagu, Kodava women, Tradition, Culture and the region of Kodagu by appreciating each and every minute aspect very symbolically.

She in fact makes the reader aware of her community and grasps the reader's attention towards the misty hilly paradise. The tradition of Kodava not just lies in culture and religion instead it is seen in their sacrifice for the nation. 'A Kodava makes a fine soldier. When he wears his army greens, laces his boots and raise the gun, there is no fumbling, no clumsiness. You have the physique, some courage and complete lack of cunning. You'll be good'. Kodagu, known for its immense contribution to army since ancestral days, has been sending kodava men to serve their nation. Nambisan populates the novels with – interesting anecdotes about the Kodagu tribes, their customs and cultures; the mixing of the Western and the local culture and its effects on the people of Coorg; the planting of coffee seeds; characters who are both modern and traditional and senile and eccentric; people who are out of tune with nature and bore the devastating effects of nature's fury through drought, flood, poor coffee yield; people preferring to live a wealthy life despite their frugality.

She writes with amusement at the blind adoration for the British culture by the Kodavas and the extent of Anglicizing their life in terms of names, lifestyle, food habits, customs, dress and the cultivation of the gardens. Nambisan's nativity and interconnectedness to the Coorgi environment translates effectively into the shaping of Nanji as she is always seen working the pliant soil with her hands and making it as worthy as possible. Nanji comes across with a body and soul enmeshed with nature and her environment and nobody can separate the two. Kavery Nambisan creates a wonderful working relationship and interconnections that are steeped in domestic realism in the novel through Nanji. What Nambisan skillfully attempts to project is the woman's domain extending from the hearth to the external environment and how she effectively manages the smooth operation of the household to the supervision of agricultural work. If Nanji is occupied with the enormous task of feeding her family and the retinue of servants with nutritious meals, pickling of fish, preparing delicacies for various festivals; she is equally at ease sowing, transplanting seeds and looking at errant leaves of the coffee plant. In fact Nanji is most comfortable when she is working in the paddy fields along with other women laborers and often relives nostalgic moments with her grandmother Neelakki. Nanji doesn't seem to indulge in feminine pleasures of knitting, sewing or tending to the garden unlike other women. On the contrary she carelessly throws the seeds in her backyard and allows a plethora of plants to survive unlike the neat patches of landscape adorning many Coorgi homes. Nanji thrives in disorder and does not attempt to stifle nature in her growth. Nambisan applauds the sturdy physical disposition of the Coorgi women to withstand failure, hardships and their capacity to outlive their husbands like the coffee in the novel and Nanji is no exception to the rule. As observed in the novel after Baliyanna's lack of interest to live and his genetic disposition to depression culminating in death, Nanji continues with her chores with determination and ensures that the family is well attended to. Indeed, Nanji outlives her husband, her deceased children and remains an ageing figure in the novel.

Kavery Nambisan's novel 'The Scent of Pepper' gives out a strong message to be an individual like Nanji who is truly connected to her own environment and nature. In fact, Nanji is the supreme embodiment of the notion of 'oikos' as the widest home and 'kritis' as the best house judge and keeper of the house in order. The novel ends on a note of hope and reassurance as its focus is to appreciate the beauty of Kodagu and its different notion of culture by adopting westernization which results in multiculturalism in the region. The novel highly contributes on culture but it holds equity with the region and woman too. The pivotal point here is to glorify Kodagu by displaying its root that is its tradition, custom which made Kodagu one of the well-known place in the nation. Kaveri Nambisan, through her novel 'The Scent of Pepper' very realistically celebrates the culture of Kodagu despite the drastic change in the modern world. She highlights the Kodavas who uphold their ancestors' thoughts and beliefs by following the age old tradition which made them different from any other community and religion.

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